

Dates are overrated, anyway by Multifandom_damnation

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Summary:

Max accidentally ruins Billy's date, and she does everything she can to make it up to him. And maybe, just maybe, it turns out even better than he ever thought possible.

Dates are overrated, anyway

Author's Note:

Neil doesn't even have a single line of dialogue but he is still the WORST part of this fic. I tried not to make Susan too evil here because while I think she's a bit 'air-headed' and willing to turn a blind eye to what Neil does to Billy, I really do think that she loves her daughter and just wants her to be happy, and I think she sort of feels sorry for Billy in a way but doesn't feel strongly enough to get in between him and Neil.

I don't know why I wrote this, but I hope you guys like it. It was pretty fun and considering I haven't published any Stranger Thing's fics in a while, it was a nice refresher.

As she watched the sunset through the tiny window in the bathroom, Max listened to her mother hum softly as she brushed her hair.

It was a nice song. One she had heard many times in her childhood, and she almost found herself humming along with her mother's familiar cadence, but the tune was unnatural in the back of her throat. She hadn't heard the song since they left California. It must have been a special occasion.

Susan looked nice. She wore a knee-length white dress with tiny colourful flower buds across it and matching white pearl earrings. Max knew that resting by the front door was a set of high-heeled shoes in crisp white, and a pearl bracelet resting on her bedroom vanity. She watched her mother brush and style her hair, pinning it back and securing it all in place with intricate twists and folds.

"Lovely night," Susan said conversationally as she glanced at Max in the mirror. Her smile was like a drug, and from where Max was seated on the counter, she found herself smiling back. "And just *look* at that sunset."

It really was a beautiful sunset, and she was willing to admit that. But her eyes were on her mother, not on the sunset, and the beautiful way she had brushed her smooth locks. "It's nice. But you're very pretty," she said as she kicked her feet. "Are you going somewhere special?"

"Nowhere special," Susan laughed as she gave her hairdo one last look and adjusted a few stray strands. "Neil and I are going out for dinner tonight at the bistro on the main street. It's very exciting. He's awfully busy these days and we haven't gone out for an incredibly long time, so it's worth getting dolled up for, don't you?"

Max couldn't help scrunting up her face. "So you and Neil are going on a *date*?"

She wasn't sure why it grossed her out so much. Maybe it was hard thinking of her mother doing anything other than washing the dishes or ironing clothes or tidying the house before Neil got home. Maybe it was because she never went on dates with her dad and it was strange seeing her get dressed up like this for someone like Neil. Or maybe it was just because she knew what kind of man Neil really was, and what he did behind closed doors when he thought nobody was looking and didn't like the idea of her mum alone with him, even if it meant getting him out of the house for a little longer than normal.

"Yes, a date," Susan laughed, misinterpreting her discomfort for childish envy. "Don't worry, we won't be out long. Just a couple of hours. We'll probably be home in time to tuck you into bed. It's just a dinner."

Knowing she had no say, Max gritted her teeth and pursed her lips and forced a smile and said. "Well, I hope you have fun."

"I'm sure we will," she smiled. "And you? Do you think you're going to be alright?"

"For a couple of hours? Yeah, I'll be fine," Max replied. She watched Neil approach from the bedroom, easily tying his tie, and chose her words carefully, keenly aware of his icy stare masked by bored indifference. "I'll just order a pizza if I get desperate."

"I don't want you out so late," Susan frowned into the mirror as she applied her makeup with a heavier than usual hand. "If Billy can't find you anything to eat in the kitchen, have him drive down and pick up some pizza. I just don't want you riding your board around after dark. I've heard stories about the kind of people who hang out on the streets at night."

The words were out of her mouth before Max could consider the implication of them. "Billy's going out tonight. It's fine, I'm sure I can manage."

Susan paused the application of her lipstick and glanced over her shoulder at Max. "He is? Where's he going?"

"He's got a date," Max said, trying to keep all hint of pride and excitement from her voice, and mostly succeeding.

But she watched as Susan looked sharply at Neil, whose expression had morphed from bored indifference to something dark and sinister, something angry and frightening and terrible, one that Max had been privy to only a handful of times right before he turned his back on her and went to seek out Billy in his secluded part of the house. Neil met Susan's eyes and left the bedroom in one quick motion, shutting the door silently behind him.

Immediately, Max felt her blood go cold. "No! Mum, you can't let-!"

"It's alright," Susan said tightly, sounding rattled. "Neil will sort it out. It'll be OK."

Gobsmacked, Max looked at her mother in the mirror in disbelief. "You can't seriously believe that."

Susan had the good sense to keep silent, and Max felt a terrible, vindictive sort of pride at the way her lips clamped shut and she refused to look at her. *Good*, she thought angrily, *so she should*.

Though she hadn't wanted to, Susan insisted that Max come out of the bathroom to see them off, and as Susan sat on the arm of the couch to buckle up her shoes, Neil entered from the end of the hall, rolling down his sleeves. Susan fixed her practised smile on him, and

his face softened just enough for Susan's shoulders to drop. Almost as if she had no idea where he had been and what he had done. She wanted to scream, but she had learnt long ago that doing so would do her no good, so instead, she bit her tongue so hard she thought she tasted blood.

She refused to wish them luck or say goodbye, but she stood at the doorway until she saw Neil's car reverse out the driveway and speed away. The moment she saw the last of the taillights, she slammed the door shut so hard that the picture frame on the wall trembled.

Breathing deeply, the only thought that reached her consciousness was running down the hall to check on Billy, and she pushed away from the front door and sprinted down the hall until she came to a sudden stop at Billy's bedroom door, pock-marked with splinters and divots and hastily-repaired holes. She pounded at the door, jiggled the handle, all to no avail. "Billy?" she pressed her ear against the wood. "Are you alright?"

He didn't answer her, and he had jammed something under the door handle to prevent it from turning. She pressed her ear against the door to the point of pain, worry gnawing at her insides until she heard the tell-tale and familiar sound of music playing softly, deafened by the wood. She wanted to go to him, to find some way to kick down the door and sit on the bed with him, but she pulled away and retreated to the couch where she curled up tightly with her knees to her chest.

An hour later, when Max was scrolling through crappy channel after boring sitcom, Billy trudged out of his room, still wearing the nice clothes she had helped him pick out earlier that morning, looking dishevelled and distraught and very pissed off. She leapt from the couch, but he ignored her, throwing over his shoulder, "I need to use the landline."

"Are you OK?" She demanded as he passed into the next room.

She thought she heard him call, "Fine," before she heard the dial tone.

Instead of listening to his hushed and vaguely apologetic-sounding

conversation, Max turned the volume up on the TV and waited for him to re-enter the room. "What happened to your date?" she asked when he finally reappeared, running a hand through his hair and tugging sharply at the tangled knots.

"Shut up," he hissed, and she blinked. She decided not to get angry, mostly because she knew that none of his ire was directed at her. It was hard to kick bad habits, she knew, but he hadn't spoken to her like that in a long time. She was willing to let it slip when she saw the angry looking red marks that wrapped around his neck, sure to turn into bruises by the morning.

A moment later, his bedroom door slammed shut and she was alone in the quiet house again.

Max felt something and familiar and unwelcomed churning around in her gut, like an angry tiger, and she stared down the hallway after where Billy had disappeared, willing him to turn around and join her on the couch. But she knew exactly what wishful thinking got her, and she reluctantly turned away and returned to staring at the TV.

He had been looking forward to his date for weeks, ever since he got talking with the woman at the pool and she had sheepishly told him that she wouldn't mind seeing him again in more formal settings. And when Max heard, she had been excited *for* him and had spent her free time helping him plan out their date under the cover of secrecy in the early hours of the morning when she knew neither parent would be awake to catch them. This morning, while Neil was at work and Susan was chatting with the next-door neighbour, Max had raided Billy's room, much to her chagrin, in order to help him decide what to wear. She had pulled out all his nice shirts and held them against him to better judge, had sniffed all his cologne one by one to choose the best fragrance, had dragged the box of formal shoes out from under his bed despite his complaining, and she had insisted that he wash the blood and dirt out from under his nails and take a shower so he didn't smell like sweat and chlorine and cigarette smoke.

Billy *never* went on dates, hadn't for the entire time that Max had known him, and the fact that he was finally, finally getting out there and enjoying himself and letting himself have fun, even after the Mind Flayer, made her feel like everything was finally starting to get

better, like the light at the end of the tunnel was getting ever so slightly closer.

But tonight, Neil had just ruined it, and it had been all Max's fault.

There was no doubt in her mind that the phone call he had made was to his lady friend to cancel their date. He had been forced to stay home and watch her, even though she was old enough to take care of herself and Billy had been in another room the entire time. Neil just wouldn't let Billy go out and have a good time. He refused to let it happen, and Max just couldn't physically understand why. She could picture it now- Neil, barging his way into Billy's room while Billy was giving himself one last once-over, shoving him against the wall or the wardrobe and wrapping his hands around his throat as he threw him around, demanding that Billy stay home and look after Max like the big brother he was supposed to be, bruising him up and getting in his face and scaring him until Billy had no choice but to agree and to forget about all hope of being free, just for the night.

Sometimes, Max wished that she could lure a Demo-dog or a Demogorgon into her house when nobody was looking, lock it in there with Neil and walk away as it tore him apart...

Abruptly, she stood from the couch and wiped her hands on her pants. She checked the pantry and the fridge for anything to eat and was surprised to turn up empty-handed. Her mother must have been truly absent-mindedly excited for her date to forget to stock the kitchen for her absence. She scowled. It should have been Billy out on a date, not Neil and her mother.

A thought came to her then, a brilliant, incredible thought, and she felt like an absolute genius for even thinking of it.

Before she could change her mind, she ran down the hall to Billy's room again and knocked on the door, less frantic this time, and hoped that he was listening. "Billy? I'm going to go out and get something to eat. Do you want anything?"

His grumbled decline was muted, but she knew from the tone more than the words that he'd rather stew in silence, so she turned around, collected her skateboard from its place on the front lawn and rode

down to the pizza place. She began to formulate the plan on the way back, two large pizzas balanced precariously on her arms, and as the cool wind whipped at her face and the wet heat of the pizza burned her arms, she couldn't help but feel a little proud of herself.

The house was exactly as she had left it, with the TV playing silently on a boring game show and the kitchen cabinets opened when she hadn't bothered to shut them, the pillows in disarray on the couch. She busied herself with placing the pizza boxes on the table and spent an admittedly long time trying to set the scene before she ventured back down the hall to try and lure Billy out from his room.

"Billy?" she called sweetly. "Can you come out for a minute? I need your help with something."

She bolted away before he could answer, and she waited eagerly by the table as she listened to his door swing open and his heavy gait approach, anticipation making her nerves sing as he got closer. She heard his grumbling before she saw him. "What do you want, Max?" he demanded irritably as he turned the corner and immediately froze in shock.

"Welcome!" she announced as brightly as possible. "To Ristorante di Max!"

Beaming, Max wore her best dress with her hair down, the necklace Billy had brought her for her birthday, and her nicest pair of slippers. Thankfully, Billy was still wearing the clothes she had helped pick out for him, minus the shoes, but she could still see the angry bruise around his throat that had only grown darker as the hours ticked by.

He stared at her as if she had grown a second head. "What the hell is this?"

"It's a date," Max smiled as she went around the table and pulled the chair out for him. She gestured at it incessantly and he slowly made his way towards it. She unfolded the lid on the pizza boxes before she went around the table and sat in her own chair opposite him. She waited until he had sat down before she spoke. "Do you like it?"

Wide-eyed and confused, Billy took a long moment to observe the

ratty checkered table-cloth thrown over the dining table, Susan's strong-smelling aromatherapy candles placed in the middle like brightly coloured make-shift candelabras, the warm pizza placed before each of them like you would find in a restaurant, the cutlery wrapped in a napkin beside the plates, the beer beside him and the glass of cola beside her, and felt a little bit overwhelmed. He had no idea what was going on or what Max's plan was, and he had even less of an idea of *why* she had gone through all this trouble. "What the fuck?" was all he could manage, but he knew it was the wrong thing to say when her shoulders sagged. "I mean, it's really nice and all, but what exactly is it?"

Max looked dejected. "Well, it's my fault that you couldn't go on your date tonight. I accidentally told my mum, and Neil was listening, and I couldn't stop him. So I thought, if you couldn't go out and have fun, maybe we could have fun here? Together? I know I'm not like that girl you were going to see, but maybe we can have our own kind of date?"

"Oh," he managed, staring at their dinner and back at her. Her eyes were hopeful, and Billy felt a burst of fondness erupt in his chest. "This is really nice of you, Max. Did you really go through all this trouble because I cancelled the date?"

"I mean," Max protested. "You only cancelled the date because I couldn't stop my big mouth from letting slip your plans for the night, so it's the least I could do to make it up to you." she faltered, looking suddenly worried. "You... you like pizza right?"

He snorted. "What kind of moron doesn't like pizza?"

She grinned, relieved, and picked up a slice of pizza. Thankfully, it was still hot, and it burnt her tongue a little. "Good," she said. "I was worried you had bad taste."

"Please," Billy snorted. "You're the one who thinks the coffee at 7-Eleven isn't so bad."

"It's not," Max protested around a mouthful of pizza. "And I can get a slushy while you get your cigarettes. Perfect convenience store."

"It's called a *convenience* store for a reason," Billy agreed, taking his own bite of pizza. He gestured at the table. "What's with the candles?"

Shrugging, Max swallowed before she answered. "I don't know. Most fancy restaurants have candles, right? I thought it would set the tone."

"Right," Billy snorted. "Why did you choose the ones that stink? What is that, rose and...?"

"Mango," Max finished. "And it's all I could find. I thought you would like these better than some of the weirder ones in there. They gave me a headache."

"Kind of like your mother," Billy teased and Max threw her crust at him. He laughed, and Max grinned.

They ate in silence for a little while, just enjoying each other company. But Max wasn't used to this kind of comfortable silence, and after they had both finished most of their pizzas, she spoke up tentatively. "I really am sorry about your date, Billy."

"Don't be," Billy shrugged, obviously having made his peace with it. "It was probably going to be a drag anyway."

Licking her lips, Max brought up the question that had been plaguing her all day. "Did you like her?"

To her surprise, Billy's expression grew sombre, and he kept his eyes focused on the pizza on his plate. "Yeah," he said, picking the toppings off. "I did."

Wincing, Max sat back in her chair, her appetite suddenly gone. "Fuck," she said. "I'm really sorry."

"As I said," he replied. "Don't be."

"Maybe you can reschedule?" she said hopefully. "Plan another date?"

"Maybe," he said, but he didn't sound convinced. "She doesn't live in

Hawkins, though. She was only on holiday or something. Said some bullshit about touring the country? I don't know. She rich LA girl shit or something."

"Oh," Max said, defeated. "So this was your only chance, huh?"

Billy shrugged, trying to seem nonplussed, but Max knew him well enough by now to know that she had hit the nail on the head. "I guess," he busied himself with another slice of pizza. "But it's alright. Another woman will come around and hopefully, you'll keep your big mouth shut next time."

"Alright, that's uncalled for," Max laughed, but she knew now when he was teasing her. His smile was cheeky, and his eyes shone with mischief. "I know this isn't what you had in mind, but I hope this is a fine replacement for your date."

"I love it, pipsqueek," Billy said as he lunged across the table and ruffled her hair, much to her annoyance, and sent the red strands all over the place. She grumbled and adjusted the mess as he settled back in his seat. "I doubt it would have been that good of a date anyway. All we we would have done was drink and kiss and fuck."

Max screwed up her face in disgust. "Yuck. I did *not* need to know that."

"Grow up," Billy rolled his eyes at her, but he was smiling. "But yeah, this is much better. I'd rather be here with you than on a date with some girl I'll probably never see again."

"Don't be so pessimistic," Max said, secretly chuffed. "She might have been the one."

"I doubt it," Billy said simply. "You probably need some kind of real connection with someone for them to be 'the one'. I met her at the pool, Max. It would have been nice to go out for once, but I doubt I would have spent my whole life with her."

Humming, Max thought around a mouthful of pizza. "Well, your welcome, then," she said. "For saving you from a boring date of kissing and drinking and..."

“Fucking?” Billy finished for her, and he cackled when she scrunched up her nose and gagged. “I wouldn’t say you were ‘saving’ me but this probably was a better way to spend my night.”

Triumphant, Max fluttered her eyelashes at him. “What do you say?”

He sighed, but it trailed off into a chuckle and she felt her heart pound harder in her chest. “Thanks, Max,” he said, and it sounded like he meant it.

It was rare that they got moments like this together, heartfelt and gentle. Their bonding moments usually involved nightmares filled with memories of demons and death and late-night drives through the darkened streets of Hawkins and bad days wrapped up with a debrief nestled in the comfort of each other’s arms.

That night, after they had painstakingly packed away their evening and hidden any and all evidence that their ‘date’ had ever happened, Max got changed into her comfiest pyjamas and spent the night in Billy’s bed after they listened to music for hours, dancing on the bed and singing at the top of their lungs, and collapsed in a happily exhausted heap, tangled in the sheets and close enough to touch, closer than they willingly been in a while.

When Susan and Neil came home, they were a little surprised to find neither of their children seated on the couch and was doubly surprised to find them sleeping in the same bed. Neil’s expression had gone sour, but Susan had stood between him and the doorway, placing her hands on his chest. “Leave them,” she said gently as not to wake them. “They’re not hurting anyone. And it’s kind of sweet, isn’t it? Seeing how far they’ve come? It’s what we’ve always wanted.”

So Neil had begrudgingly left them alone, and Susan had shut the door with a smile, and Billy and Max were left to bask in the afterglow of the best date ever.